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ABSTRACT

Recently a number of writers and researchers have praised the editing and text moving capabilities of word processing programs, proposing that they can be useful in helping students revise more readily and skillfully. With this premise, 16 eighth grade students participated in a program in which they used a text editor or word processing system to complete written assignments. The system used was "Easy Script" for the Commodore 64 microcomputer. After 2 weeks of practice with the editing functions, the students began simple composition assignments. They also participated in editing groups. Students then brought assignments from other classes to complete using the text editor. After 5 weeks, students filled out a questionnaire concerning their attitudes toward word processing. The responses as well as the observations of the students' behaviors indicated that the students were very positive about their experiences with the word processing system. One of the most obvious benefits of the use of the word processing system was the development of a sharing attitude among students enhanced by the computer lab or center. Probably the most usable word processing system for students is a scholastic program called "Bank Street Writer," although the "Easy Script" proved successful. One instructor asserts that teaching a sophisticated word processing system such as "WordStar" is, in the long run, more beneficial to students than are simpler programs. (HTH)

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# Using Word Processing to Teach Revision in Written Composition

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Most writers emphasize the importance of revision; yet it is perhaps the "least researched, least examined, least understood, and--usually--least taught" (Murray, 1978, p. 85) of the writing skills. Teachers often decry students' lack of motivation to revise and point out that when students do revise, especially if they are not very skilled in writing, they tend to revise only superficially. This tendency of many students to concentrate their revision efforts at surface and word levels has been confirmed by studies of the writing process (Bridwell, 1980; Perl, 1979). Recently, a number of writers and researchers have praised the editing and text moving capabilities of word processing programs

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and have proposed that these programs can be useful in helping students revise more readily and skillfully (Bean, 1983; Bradley, 1982; Daiute, 1982; Hennings, 1981, 1983; Monahan, 1982; Schwartz, 1982; Whithey, 1983). These authors note that computers can help students revise by reducing the frustrations of recopying, by facilitating the reading of text during the writing stages, and by making possible the reproduction of multiple drafts of compositions for easy sharing with teachers and peers during the writing process. They praise the motivation engendered by the computer. Students seem to be able to get started more easily and to be enthusiastic about seeing their words on the computer screen and on neat copies produced by the computer's printer. Papert (1980) cites children in his MIT computer center who went from "total rejection of writing to an intense involvement (accompanied by rapid improvement in quality) within a few weeks of beginning to write with the computer" (p. 30).

This paper presents a discussion of the use of word processing with student writers. Included in this discussion are the following: a description of a program in which students used word processing to practice composing skills, insights gained from observations of these students, results of a questionaire measuring students' attitudes toward the use of word processing, and some suggestions about future uses of word processing with students.

## Description of the Program

Sixteen eighth grade students participated in a program in which they used a text editor or word processing system to complete written assignments. The word processing system used was Easy Script for the Commodore 64 microcomputer. The instruction and practice took place

in a computer center with twelve computers, and the assignments included those developed specifically for the program and ones the students received as part of their regular language arts, social studies, and science classes. When the program began, students received four one-hour periods of instruction in the use of Easy Script. Then, they spent one week practicing with sentence combining and paragraph moving activities. These activities were similar to those found in the manual for the Scholastic version of Bank Street Writer. The activities helped students learn the editing functions of Easy Script. The students began to do simple compositions during the third and fourth weeks of the program. These composition assignments were accompanied by prompts developed by the students' language arts teacher and entered as text files in Easy Script. Students also participated in editing groups. Next, students brought assignments from other classes to complete using the text editor. After five weeks, students filled out a questionnaire concerning their attitudes toward word processing. Information gained from the questionnaire and from observations of these students will be used to plan a school district-wide program in which word processing will be a part of the composition instruction for all middle school language arts classes.

## Implications

The questionnaire used to measure students' attitudes was adapted from one used by Bradley (1982). The questions and the mean response for each question are listed below. The responses to the questionnaire as well as the observations of the students' behaviors indicated that the students were very positive about their experiences with a word processing system. The motivational aspects of writing with a computer reported by Bean (1983), Bradley (1982), Daiute (1983), and Schwartz

(1982) were confirmed by the responses of the students in this program. Students' comments centered around the advantages of having their papers "look good," and many cited the text editor's ease of use.

Questionaire

1. How did you like the writing activities with the microcomputer?

   (A lot) 1 2 3 4 5 (Not at all)

   Response 2.2

2. How difficult was it for you to learn the commands?

   (Very easy) 1 2 3 4 5 (Very difficult)

   Response 1.6

3. Is it easier to write with a pen or pencil or on the microcomputer?

   (Microcomputer) 1 2 3 4 5 (Pen/pencil)

   Response 1.7

4. Is it easier to make changes in what you have written when you are using pen and paper, or a microcomputer?

   (Microcomputer) 1 2 3 4 5 (Pencil)

   Response 1.4

5. Do you think other eighth grade students could learn to use the microcomputer for writing assignments?

   (All) 1 2 3 4 5 (None)

   Response 1.5

6. Write a few sentences giving your comments or opinions about using the microcomputer for writing assignments.

Students' Interaction

One of the most obvious benefits of the use of the word processing program was the development of sharing that seemed to be enhanced by the computer lab or center. Students were inclined to share their work with each other. As they sat at the computers, those who were

most comfortable with the commands of the word processing system helped their neighbors. This often led to helpful comments about papers and suggestions for improvement. Perhaps the computer can help in developing a sharing, supportive atmosphere in classrooms where students are learning to write.

Revision Strategies

In spite of the interest directed at computers and revision, there has been very little study of the kinds of revisions students make when they use the computer. Collier (1983) found that very little higher level revision was accomplished by the students he studied. He observed that revising using the computer was more fragmented and focused on small details than that done without the computer. However, Collier noted that the word processing system his students used was so difficult to master that much of their energy and time was devoted to learning to manipulate the word processing system itself. The students in the program discussed here also concentrated on errors in spelling and mechanics. Very little effort was made to perform large, whole composition revisions. However, the time period devoted to this program was very short, and students were limited in the time they had available to compose on the computer. They seemed to begin to make more complete revisions when the assignments were more meaningful to them--when they were writing reports for other classes as part of their regular class assignments. Lack of time to use the computer hampered all composition efforts. Students had to complete their assignments during class time. Student access to computers before and after school could help to make revising with computers more comprehensive.

Word Processing Systems for Students

Probably the most usable word processing system for students is Bank Street Writer; however, since it was not available for the computer used in this program, the Commodore 64, Commodore's Easy Script was selected. It was very usable for the students. They were able to use it easily after the somewhat complicated manual was simplified in the form of a two-page handout developed by the students' computer literacy teacher. She had a thorough understanding of what information the students would need to know to make the word processing system work. The lack of understandable documentation is a drawback to many word processing systems, but a knowledgeable teacher can make the documentation more usable for students. Of course, Bank Street Writer with its onscreen instructions makes the simplification of the documentation unnecessary. As one reviewer said of Bank Street Writer, "If you can read, skip the manual and start writing" (Zarley, 1983, p. 95).

In a recent article, Targ (cited in Littlefield, 1983) asserted that teaching a sophisticated word processing system, WordStar, to students is more beneficial than teaching them to use simple programs like Bank Street Writer. She reported that seventh and eighth grade students learned to use WordStar with proficiency, and she proposed that, since young writers can learn to use a sophisticated program, they should not be limited to a less powerful one. She did not indicate how much access the students in her program had to computers, but, in most schools, the amount of time available for students to master a word processing program is very limited. Findings published by Becker (1983) indicated that fully two thirds of the instructional time students have on computers in secondary schools is devoted to programming and computer literacy.

Drill and practice activities take up another 18 percent, and the remainder is split among other applications. No more than seven percent of the time is used for word processing, including that taught in high school business classes. Because the amount of time available for students to use computers for composition is so limited, the word processing program chosen for classroom use should be usable when students have been away from it for days or even weeks. The program should be easy to master for another reason. If one intends to help students become better writers, not just better computer users, the commands of the program should not interfere with attention to the already complicated process of composing.

The activities and prompts used in this program were entered as text files in Easy Script, and, while they were helpful in teaching the editing and text moving functions of the program and in giving the students practice in writing, they did not provide real guidance in writing or interaction with the computer. Word processing programs like The Writer's Assistant that may be used along with interactive components to guide students through the writing process offer promise in the use of computers to enhance writing instruction.

Computers and the Writing Process

Computers have been praised for the promise they hold in teaching students to perform perhaps the most difficult part of the writing process, revision. However, there are probably two reasons that students have difficulty with revision. First, the process is physically and mentally tiresome with its laborious rewriting and recopying, and second, students may not see any real reason to revise. The computer can help with the first problem; it can make the process of revision

much easier. The second problem is greatly influenced by the concept of writing that guides the students' instruction. Papert's (1980) statement that "The computer is not a culture unto itself but can serve to advance very different cultural and philosophical outlooks" (p. 31) is applicable to the use of computers in the teaching of writing. If the production of a piece of writing is taught, as it often is, as a one-shot attempt written for the teacher-as-evaluator, the computer, with all its wonderful functions and applications, will not lead to the development of better writers. If students learn word processing as they receive the guidance of a teacher who truly understands what it is like to be a writer, the computer will fulfill the promise that it holds in helping students see writing as the discovery process it is.

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Easy Script, Commodore Business Machines, 487 Devon Park Dr., Wayne, Pa. 19087.

WordStar, MicroPro International, 33 San Pablo Ave., San Rafael, Ca. 94903.

The Writer's Assistant, Interlearn, P. O. Box 342, Cardiff By The Sea, Ca. 92007.